

Opinion: Tahoe Fund anything but altruistic

By Jacqui Grandfield

A couple of decades ago resort developers began their invasion of the Tahoe area. They bought homes in our communities, enrolled their kids in local schools and almost immediately became active locally by joining committees and doing volunteer work. Then they started offering “donations” to our local, struggling nonprofits.

Some far-sighted people, realizing that this was a thinly veiled attempt to buy their loyalty and cooperation for future development plans, declined to take the money. Some even resigned their jobs with non-profs they helped create.

Fast forward 10 years or so. These same resort developers began offering money to our local environmental and public agencies. Fearing these donations would constitute a conflict of interests and be seen by the public as bribes from special interest groups, the agencies danced around this issue for several years, publicly denying any money exchange.

The Great Recession of 2008 made these same local agencies desperate for money as government spending was drying up. Along comes the California Tahoe Conservancy’s new executive officer, with a “great” idea. He would start a nonprofit comprised of local environmentalists and developers to cooperate and provide financing for small, local projects ... another idea of his, proved disastrous for the Delta Bay ecosystem (and the Delta Bay Authority) at a cost of over \$3 billion to taxpayers.

Numerous calls to the California Attorney General’s Office and a CTC board member resulted in no answer to a simple question: Is it even legal for a state public environmental agency to

start a nonprofit with such powerful special interest groups as Vail, KSL, JMA, et al?

TRPA tells us this public/private cooperation is the economic future for Tahoe.

Enter the Tahoe Fund. The picture that's been painted for the general public is that of a nonprofit group of environmentalists and developers working together to help restoration efforts by providing funding, and presumably expertise, to all sorts of natural resource projects in the basin. The stated purpose of the Tahoe Fund is "to become a major source of private funding for environmental projects around the Lake Tahoe Basin ..."

Sounds good at first, right? But, what's really the difference from prior decades? Now they have communications and media experts who mislead the general public about their purpose and intent and the methods they use to achieve them.

In reality, this group is part of an "iron triangle", a result of the sub-government structure that dominates in the basin. This "cozy triangle" as it is often called, consists of federal government, state and local government and special interest groups (pressure groups), both public and private. The public group wants resource protection and education while the private groups want profit.

The problem is these two pressure groups do not have equal resources in that private groups have much, much more money and thus way more influence. The Tahoe Fund is a perfect example of private special interests controlling the average Tahoe citizen's life and environment. Add this to the fact that the majority of our local governments are run by non-elected, appointed officials. Where does this leave the less powerful public interest groups and the public in general? It leaves them virtually powerless in Tahoe's cozy triangles.

A final insult to the public, but a great deal for developers

is they can throw money or what amounts to their pocket change at small projects around Tahoe while proceeding with their mega developments. These projects, even those costing \$10 million to \$12 million, are great for a localized area but can in no way offset the widespread, massive environmental and cultural damage caused by huge, unnecessary developments.

What they can do is provide developers and other private investors with mitigation offsets, potential development right transfers, a nonprofit tax shelter and most egregiously, a powerful and cheap public relations tool to convince Tahoeans that developers are great people who support community, environment and economy.

Otherwise why is the Tahoe Fund board composed of ski industry CEO's such as Andy Wirth and Art Chapman, CTC's Patrick Wright, local government officials, venture capitalists and "token environmentalists" (who are also donors)? Why is the Fund's CEO a public relations and marketing specialist? And, is it possible that these "special interests" receive favors for their monetary contributions in the form of extra TAUs, rezoning conservation areas, expanded coverage, height and so on?

The Tahoe Fund is not an altruistic entity. It is part of big developers' strategy to influence public opinion in their favor.

Does anyone really trust these special entities to protect and enhance our communities and natural resources when their main goal is money? There are reasonable, effective solutions to combat the corruption and influence these types of pressure groups create. We could demand that more of our public officials are elected by the people, for the people and not appointed by questionable public agencies and special interests?

That's one idea, what's yours?

Jacqui Grandfield is a wildlife biologist and environmental policy expert who lives in Lake Tahoe.